

Down with learning objectives

By [Adam J. Copeland](#)

April 21, 2015

Ever since I started teaching **I've always had a skeptical view of the very foundation of most college courses: learning objectives.**

Until recently, I'd be happy to go off on learning objectives (LOs) without any very nuanced reason why. Now, finally, I think I've found a way to articulate my contradictory point of view.

To begin, I suppose I should make it clear that I'm not exactly against LOs. I mean, I support learning. Huge fan, in fact. And, yes, I think teaching and learning should be approached with some sort of particularity. I appreciate the need to be able to assess learning, and that such assessment is difficult (impossible?) to do well without clearly defined LOs. Duly noted.

Next, for the uninitiated, learning objectives usually appear near the top of a course syllabus (or some other learning document). They articulate what students should know or be able to demonstrate at the end of a course or lesson. The trick is keeping LOs rightly balanced between being too specific and too broad. Plus, they should be able to be assessed or measured in some way (more [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#)).

So far so good. Over the years, in my contradictory way I did enunciate some small-scale concerns about the magical learning objective. For instance:

- Learning objectives rarely take into account the different starting points of students.
- Learning objectives can confine, limiting openness to exploring unexpected areas of concern that develop as a course is taught.
- Learning objectives can seem to undercut learning for learning's sake. What of the love of learning itself (very hard to measure)?
- Learning objectives, in faculty workshops, take up too much faculty energy considering how to write the damn things instead of, actually, how to teach well.

- Learning objectives privilege the instructor's concerns over those of the students.

For these reasons and more, I've come to sometimes **hiding learning objectives** in the appendix of my course syllabi. Instead, I have a section up front headed, "Some areas we'll cover include..." My learning objectives exist, they just mostly hangout backstage.

But this is all small ball. Finally, I think I've found a way to articulate my larger annoyance with LOs. To explain, I need to make a connection to organizational leadership.

In organizational planning processes, orgs will often develop mission statements with (albeit general) objectives. For example, here's the mission statement of [Westminster Presbyterian Church](#) in Minneapolis:

In response to the grace of God through Jesus Christ, Westminster's mission is to:

- *proclaim and celebrate the Good News of Jesus Christ;*
- *gather as an open community to worship God with dignity and joy, warmth and beauty;*
- *nourish personal faith through study, prayer, and fellowship;*
- *work for love, peace, and justice;*
- *be a welcoming and caring Christian community, witnessing to God's love day by day;*
- *work locally and beyond with our denomination and the larger Christian Church;*
and
- *be a telling presence in the city.*

Yes, learning objectives and mission statements are far from exact replicates, but they do both describe the main purpose of an organization. They both provide focus. They both indicate the direction of the organization.

Considering mission statements and learning objectives together, however, alerted me to my main concern, the one I hadn't ever been able to articulate: **learning objectives lack values**. Well, of course they have values in that everything is value-laden, but typical learning objectives describe what, by the end of a course, students will be able to do. Typically, **LOs don't describe how students will get there. They describe the destination without revealing anything about the**

journey.

And, as for me and my class, the journey is the whole point! If learning objectives are like a mission statement, what's missing is the learning **values statement**. What's missing is the process by which the learning community will grow together. What's missing is how the class will accomplish its learning.

At the end of the day, I'm just as—if not more—concerned about the learning community we develop, about the love for learning we foster, about the empathy we gain, about the neighbors we love, about the laughter we share, about the questions we raise, and about the souls we cherish as I am about the predictable, measurable LOs we meet.

I'm sure there's probably some way to mold LOs to suggest values and teaching style, but that's not really my point. If LOs are supposed to key students into what a class is about, **I contend a class is about the experience created and the values lived-out more than what's actually read, tested, and memorized**. By heading our syllabi with LOs we're already leading students astray.

I close with a story. Back when I was in seminary, I remember the day when the eminent **Walter Brueggemann** guest-lectured in my Old Testament course. Students had heard many stories of Brueggemann, scholar unparalleled, man without an unpublished thought. So, obviously, we were taking notes of his lecture like stenographers on steroids. A few minutes in Brueggemann looked at us said something like, "I'm flattered, but you might as well stop taking notes. Chances are you're never going to look at those notes once you graduate and are serving in ministry. Instead, look up. Engage with me here and now; what sticks is what matters."

I hope to teach in a way in which *what sticks is what truly matters*. Put that on a syllabus and call it learning.

Originally posted at [A Wee Blether](#)